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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing trend to split the two areas, literature belongs in the composition class. In responding to literature, students can trace their own developing thought. They acquire, through literary discourse, a tool of discovery. This tool closely resembles expressive discourse, the mode, as James Kinneavy suggests in "A Theory of Discourse," with which language use begins. In both the writer becomes the primary audience and initial subject, a spectator attempting to evaluate his or her own experiences. A major error in writing courses, and, more specifically, in the use of literature to teach composition, is hurrying the student too quickly from the expressive to the persuasive or informative mode. In the informative analyses or argument papers required in most literary themes, the writer must make the difficult shift from what James Britton calls the spectator's role as reader of literature to the participant's role as objective analyst. If given enough time, however, students will gradually develop their own rhetorical context, shaping their relationships among speaker, subject, and audience. As they have the same aim--discovery--and the same stance--the spectator's, literary and expressive discourse clearly can work well together to improve thinking and writing skills. (MM)

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Connecting Two Aims of Discourse: The Literary and the Expressive

It seems strange to come before a group of professional writing teachers to argue for the place of literature in a composition course. Most of us, after all, were trained initially as literary scholars, or at least our interest in teaching began with an interest in literature, even perhaps a belief that knowing literature could broaden our perspectives, change or shore up our students' belief systems, and if not change the world, at least open up minds. Some of us came to composition late, only after beginning careers as students and teachers of British or American literature. Others began strictly as composition specialists, sometimes accused of not knowing or caring about the place of literary study in a college curriculum. Whatever our initial perspective, however, in the last twenty years the two areas have split decidedly in many programs across the country.

In fact, there has been a growing rift in many departments between "the lit people" and "the comp people," each wary of the other's territories, motivations, and political stances. Professors in traditional literature programs have watched their graduate students move away from interests in purely literary studies to strategies for improving their own students' writing, particularly as the 1960's saw more graduate students teaching more composition courses at large universities with open admissions policies. Universities responded with graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition, which further distinguished areas of expertise. And, as Rhetoric and Composition has established itself

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as a viable discipline, often with broader opportunities for employment, the two camps have become even more firmly entrenched. On the one side the "lit people" feel that the "comp people" have no scholarly interests or background; the "comp people" that the literary scholars are not attuned to modern problems. As a result, literature, once the staple of required introductory English courses, has become more and more removed from the composition course, giving way to themes like "language" or "popular culture" and focussing on advertising or social issues for course content. One of the oddest results of the split is that only in recently devised "writing across the curriculum" courses has it become acceptable once again to use literature, in the Humanities section of the course. Many composition teachers admit to being glad for the opportunity to return literature to their teaching, especially if they can integrate it into their theories about how writing, and writers, work.

My argument today, however, will approach this issue part of through the back door. I don't want to support the use of literature in the writing classroom for its own sake or its "enlightening" capabilities. There are better arguments for using literature that are based in recent composition research. I want to argue for a particular sort of writing which, I believe, works well with literature as its basis. Expressive discourse can be used systematically as the starting point for teaching the process of writing and as a way of monitoring that process and using writing as a means of discovery, just as literary discourse has traditionally been seen as a tool for discovery and a way to become aware of

developing thought.

I take my terms, obviously, from James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse, which classifies all writing according to four aims: the informative, the persuasive, the literary, and the expressive. Kinneavy's purpose is not to connect these divergent aims, but to classify them according to their logical, syntactic, and semantic structures. But he does argue that expressive discourse is "psychologically prior" to all other forms of writing. Kinneavy's definition of expressive discourse focusses on the writer who has a personal stake in the undertaking, and a personal commitment to the subject. He answers the typical argument against expressive writing--that it is simply self-indulgent, emotive outbursts--by describing it as directed by its own particular aim of discovery of purpose. Expressive writing, then, has the writer as the primary audience and the initial subject. Freed from the demands of audience expectations, the writer can use expressive discourse to discover his or her own meaning and purpose.

James Britton's work makes the connection between expressive discourse and the other aims which Kinneavy describes. Like Kinneavy, he believes that all language use begins with the expressive aim of discovery, or learning. Drawing from cognitive psychologists' studies of language acquisition and how language actually works, Britton posits that we use language to objectify and categorize our experience. We symbolize experience in language in order to deal with it, and then we can symbolize and categorize the representation itself. When we cast ourselves as observers of our own experience in language, which writing

by its very nature does, as does literature, we are operating in what Britton calls the role of the spectator. A spectator's language is motivated by the desire to evaluate and understand experience. It is talk which goes back over experiences with a sympathetic listener. Such language allows the speakers to understand an experience in ways which are impossible while they are engaged as participants. For example, people will discuss a car accident much differently over dinner than while they were explaining it to the police. Or, friends will share the same story of a party over and over again, sometime simply to enjoy it, sometimes to understand its dynamics more clearly, or sometimes to form bases from which to structure their behavior at the next. Obviously, I will discuss this presentation much differently in the Writing Center at U of L next week than I did when I first submitted my proposal for approval. In other words, a spectator's language serves to distance the speaker from the subject and allow for reflection and understanding. Spectator language, therefore, becomes an appropriate way to foster learning, particularly about the form and function of language itself, one of the goals of composition courses. Britton says: "A spectator uses this freedom for the purpose of paying attention, in a way that a participant is unable to, not only to the pattern, the form, taken by the feelings of participants in an experience, but also to forms of other kinds." Yet I believe composition teachers have not taken advantage of this sort of language use in their reading or writing assignments.

In fact, Britton defines "literature" as the most sophisticated written form of a spectator's language in the sense that the author

invites the reader to observe and evaluate a shared world in order to reach some understanding of it in relation to the reader's. Now, one of the reasons why literature has not been a successful tool in teaching composition is that teachers have ignored the aims of the discourse their students read and write. Typical assignments in composition courses using literature ask students to write essays in the participant's role: informative analyses of themes and characters or persuasive arguments about intended meanings for public, distant, or even unspecified audiences. In other words, teachers have asked students to read in the spectator's role and write in the participant's, ignoring the basis of both in expressive discourse.

I want to suggest that because a key dimension of expressive writing is the spectator's stance, it lends itself to writing in response to literature. Just as readers of literature become spectators while they follow and evaluate the unraveling action of a novel, student writers become spectators of their own thought processes while they use expressive discourse. The expressive writing they produce becomes their developing responses to the literature they are reading, and the very act of writing for themselves allows them to monitor and objectify that response. Both literary and expressive discourse demand a self-conscious "looking back" at the text-so-far--both the short story and the student response--in order to discover meaning, and a looking forward to devise expectations for what is to come. Such reflection allows student writers the freedom to explore and explain their purpose to themselves before

going public. Yet often teachers have demanded that students leap to an expert's stance without first discovering any link between their subjects and themselves. Assignments designed to elicit expressive writing, however, allow students to develop such links as they figure out on paper their responses to the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," for example. As they begin to look back at those responses in order to arrive at generalities about O'Connor's purpose, or the Misfit's motivations, they discover meanings which they would have missed without becoming spectators, both as readers of fiction and as observers of their own writing. Britton supports the learning role of the spectator's language: He says, "We might represent actuality in language and then, going back to examine the language we have produced, discover something about the nature of relationships existing in actuality." The discovery role of a spectator's language provides the soundest argument for using expressive discourse as a strategy for teaching composition. And it most clearly connects literary discourse to the aim of composition courses. Both are based on evaluation according to personal feelings and experiences in ways that more transactional readings and writings prohibit. Both demand a looking back at initial responses in order to synthesize a final, more generalized meaning, usually demanded by more referential, academic contexts.

Teaching the relationship of such generalities to more specific details is a central part of teaching writing. All of the attention to "the composing process" in the last fifteen years has demonstrated that

writing specialists are interested in more than mastery of grammar or control of formal conventions. The profession believes that writing can become a way to learn, and that control over the writing process brings with it control of many kinds: intellectual development, clearer communication, even political power. Yet attention to this process often remains superficial as teachers move their students too quickly to concerns for audience or arrangement, instead of using writing as a means of invention. Just as the process of reading literature requires readers to synthesize a meaning out of individual elements, expressive discourse can bring about an understanding of the composing process by making students conscious of their developing thoughts on paper. Therefore, literature and expressive writing, because they operate from the same aim, discovery, and the same stance, the spectator's, work well together in a course which is designed to foster improved writing and thinking skills.

So, the argument raised against using literature in a composition class in favor of using readings with an ostensibly "clearer" rhetorical context--ads, editorials--reveals a superficial attention to the written products students will examine and produce. If composition teachers are as interested in the composing process as the wealth of journals and new textbooks suggests, then they will develop an interest in the process of helping students develop a rhetorical context themselves. Both literary and expressive discourse offer unique opportunities for teachers and students to pay attention to the reading and writing processes as students <u>themselves</u> shape the relationship among speaker, subject, and audience. Finally, perhaps such an orientation toward the

process of writing can lead the profession away from such distinctions as "lit person" or "comp person," and away from arbitrary divisions between personal and public writing. After all, we are all primarily interested in teaching our students how language shapes and communicates knowledge.